Thomas E. Shea, ADVOCATE of RELIGION, POLITICS and BUSINESS, Stage House Cleaner.

Actor Tells Why He Believes "Jekyll and Hyde" Will Live for Generations and Name Become a Synonym.

Has No Patience With Plays Having Sordid Themes, and, Like All Portrayers of Classic Roles, He Is a Firm Shakespearean Champion.

By JAMES RUSSELL PARK.

He is a heavily-set man, slightly below the average in height, Napoleonic in appearance, in the prime of life, with iron gray hair, and smooth-shaven, strong face—the last person in the world anyone would take for an actor in a popular-priced melodrama theater. That is Thomas E. Shea, the star in "A Soldier of the Cross," "The Bells," and "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," as I saw him one afternoon early last week in the parlor of the Raleigh Hotel.

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A Magnetic Personality.

On first sight, Mr. Shea would impress one as being a prosperous merchant, lawyer, or doctor, and it only requires five minutes' conversation with him to convince any one that he is a student—a deep student of philosophy and human nature. He is a very earnest man, strong in his convictions, and few today are better read than he. As he talks and expounds his theories, one unconsciously wonders if he has not missed his vocation in not being a professor in a leading university.

At the same time one receives the impression that whatever his vocation, he is a man to succeed, through sheer will power, if for no other reason. The contour of his face, with its strong jaw, firm lips, and determined eyes show it. He impressed me that way before I had been talking to him ten minutes. I had never seen him before, but I felt the force of his magnetic personality, and my artist friend told me afterward that he did, too. When Mr. Shea talked about reaching over the footlights and gripping the hearts of his audience, I was ready to swear that if anybody could do it, he was the person.

This is the manner of man that I went to interview. After the usual greetings and pleasantries, such as the weather, etc., had been dispensed with, we three, Mr. Shea, the artist, and myself, sought out a cosy corner in the hotel parlor, and the actor and I commenced to spar for a beginning of the interview, while the artist was a lone spectator. Mr. Shea wanted me to name the subject, while I preferred to let the conversation drift until the subject presented itself.

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About Jekyll and Hyde.

After three or four false starts, we made a beginning with the interpretations of "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," with its theme of dual personalities. From that the subject veered to his new production of "A Soldier of the Cross," to politics, religion, and business. Through it all there was a basic note in all that Mr. Shea said. It was that every man should have just three things uppermost in his mind—things that should govern his whole life—and they are religion, politics, so far as the Government he lives under is affected by it, and last, but not least, his business. As it subsequently developed, that was the subject of our interview.

Experience has taught me that the quickest way to get an interview, when the subject is willing but the topic is undecided, is to make some assertion in a positive way, no matter how rash it may be. The sooner an argument is started, the sooner will the conversation become animated. Acting on this theory and with the ice already broken toward "Jekyll and Hyde," I ventured to remark that I had seen Robert Louis Stevenson's play produced three times—

"I won't have a play in my repertoire that my mother, my wife, or my daughter cannot witness."

first by a ten-twenty-thirty actor; next by a stock actor, and lastly by Richard Mansfield, and that I prefered the interpretation of the first named to that of Mansfield.

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Subject a Broad One.

Mr. Shea was properly horrified.

"Did this actor you speak of use tusks?" he queried.

I admitted that he did, and continued: "I drew my comparisons rather from the characters they interpreted, and not the use of stage tricks. This actor of mine gave Jekyll the elderly, venerable appearance that one pictures in his mind as he reads the original story, while Mansfield makes him a comparatively young man."

"It is quite natural that, having seen this actor first, you would compare all others by that standard," responded Mr. Shea, "but you must remember that 'Jekyll and Hyde' deals with the subject of dual personalities, which is perhaps one of the broadest of the present day, and interpreting it allows the actors much leeway.

"As a matter of fact, the book, as written by Mr. Stevenson, barely touches upon the subject, and is what one might call incomplete. I really am surprised that a writer of Mr. Stevenson's attainments and genius should have barely dipped into the outer fringe of the subject, and then left it.

The Artist's Idea of Mr. Shea's Disinclination to Discuss Ibsen.

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Theme Will Live Forever.

"I believe that the play and theme will live forever, and as time goes on, probably after you and I are dead and gone, people will come to know more about dual personalities and the interpretations of Stevenson's character will advance with the times. The interpretations of, say, 100 years from now would seem unreal to us, because they are not of our day.

"Do you mean that the play itself will live for generation after generation, as Shakespeare's works have?" I asked, incredulously.

"I certainly do," was the rejoinder. "Furthermore, I believe that the term 'Jekyll and Hyde' will become a synonymous term for dual personality. Don't misunderstand me. I don't mean that the play, as it is produced today, will continue intact through time, but the theme and probably the name.

"It is a very great subject, and goes far back beyond our time, and even that of Mr. Stevenson. In fact, there is a grave doubt in my mind if Stevenson did not get his first suggestion for the story from Mrs. Shelley's 'Frankenstein'—you've read it, haven't you?"

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Predecessors of Book and Play.

I confessed that I had not.

"It deals with the subject of dual personalities," continued Mr. Shea, "and goes into it much deeper than Stevenson did. Then there was a French play, which was produced more than 100 years ago, which also treated the subject more fully than Stevenson's novel. It's very broadness makes it an excellent play for an actor for the very reason that it enables him to study and expand; its possibilities are limitless, you might say, and the actor is consequently not hampered by any limitations. He can go beyond the book, and delve as deep into the problem as he wishes."

"Do you prefer the role to the one you essay in 'A Soldier of the Cross'?" I asked.

"I canot say that I do," was his evasive reply. "It is entirely different, and then I have a very great interest in my new play. The latter has a religious theme, and it differs from the majority of the plays dealing with the early Christian period, in that there is no suggestion whatever of sensualism. I won't have a play in my repertoire that my mother, my wife, or my daughter cannot witness."

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Stage House Cleaner.

"Then you are an advocate of reform in our repertoire of plays?" I inquired, interestedly. The situation was unique. Here was an actor who declares himself for the higher drama while for years he has confined his work to theaters that exploit what is commonly known as "blood-and-thunder" melodrama.

"Well, you could hardly call it that," Mr. Shea dissented. "Every form of drama has its special niche in the theatrical world, and rightly so, but I cannot condone plays that deal with sordid subjects. There is too much of it in real life, and why should we exploit it in the glare of the footlights?"

"Then you do not care for Ibsen?" I ventured.

"As a whole, I do not," was his surprising answer, "although 'The Doll's House' is all right."

Mr. Shea showed no inclination to discuss Ibsen, and I turned to the good old standby, Shakespeare.

"I suppose you rank Shakespeare first in dramatic literature?" I asked, as a beginning.

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Anent Shakespearean Plays.

"I most certainly do," he answered, and I thought I detected a note of reverence in his voice.

"Then you deplore the apparent decadence of interest in Shakespearean productions," I persisted.

"I would hardly say that interest in Shakespearean plays is dying out," argued Mr. Shea. "Shakespeare has its following, and always will. This is especially true of the South and West. In the East—by this I mean New York and New England—there is a tendency to avoid plays where one must think."

"Do you mean by that that the South and West are more advanced in their dramatic tastes, or are they behind the times?" I asked.

"No one could say that a regard for the legitimate and serious drama is an indication of being behind the times," replied Mr. Shea, thoughtfully. "It rather means that they devote more time to the improvement of the literary side of their minds."

"Don't you think that the desire for relaxation from the great mental strain of business is responsible for the popularity of the light, frothy attractions?" I suggested.

"Possibly," he agreed, "but a person may get relaxation and rest from a serious drama. For instance, I can rest and derive pleasure from sitting down and reading a voluminous Treasury report, or even the Congressional Record, when there is something in it in which I am interested."

"Does that mean that you are interested in politics?"

"In a measure, yes," he responded. "Every man should be, and furthermore he should take a greater interest in conducting the government he lives under than he does. You know that a very large majority of the people have very little interest in an election the day after compared with the day before. I am just as much interested a month after as I was on election day.

"It is a hard thing to say, but the majority lose all interest in elections and governments just as soon as they fail to see any monetary advantage in sight. They are interested for revenue only. There is another thing that I have always maintained, and that is that we should have an educational qualification for all voters, and not restrict it to foreign-born citizens.

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Thousands of Ignorant Voters.

"There are thousands and thousands of men voting in this country who have no right whatever to cast a ballot. If you were to go to them as they were about to cast their vote and take a hold of his arm this way (here he gripped my arm and looked fiercely into my eyes), and said: 'Who are you voting for and why?' you would not be able to get an intelligent answer.

"You are probably surprised at my earnestness over this subject. It is a part of my creed. I believe that every human being should be wrapped up in his religion, the politics of his government, and his business. In using the word politics, I use it in the broad sense, and do not mean the Republican or Democratic parties.

"Those three things—religion, politics, and business are so closely linked in the lives of everyone that they cannot be separated, and shouldn't be."

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A Word or Two About New York.

Despite what Mr. Shea says that every man should do, I am not, and never have been, very much interested in politics, and by the way of changing the subject, I remarked:

"Did I understand rightly a little while ago that you no longer consider New York the spring from which all dramatic successes should flow?"

"I don't think now, and never have, that New York should govern the theatrical world," he said, slowly. "There are many plays on the road today that are making money after having been condemned by New York. Of course, that city will continue to be a theatrical center to a certain extent, because the majority of the big producers have located there.

"New York is practically home to me, but I am far from thinking that the sun rises and sets there. The people that live there are mistaken in many things they do. This can apply to the dramatic writers especially, too. They have developed a mania for carrying criticism too far and making it personal.

"I believe in a fair and just criticism. It helps the actor. But tell

What Mr. Shea Would Do to the Stage.

me what good is a long article attacking the personal appearance of one particular person? His or her looks has nothing whatever to do with the way the part is acted.

"The critic and actor should work together and no fair-minded player will feel offended when his attention is called to a misconception or a misinterpretation. It is a help to him. Take, for instance, Charlotte Cushman. She was without doubt the greatest of American actresses. What chance would she stand today with the New York idea of criticising?"

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Mr. Shea's Prediction.

From this the conversation drifted around to the classification of drama again and Mr. Shea declared it his belief that the time will come when the serious drama will be in the ascendancy.

"Do you mean that the light, frothy musical comedy will give way to the serious plays?" I asked.

"No, no; I didn't say that," said Mr. Shea. "It will always have its clientele. But people will encourage the production of clean, serious dramas more and the actor will have a greater incentive for higher ambitions."

With a few generalities my interview with this man of the melodrama, who seeks to purify and uplift the stage, came to an end. It was a pleasure to meet and talk to him and, when in parting he said: "Come and see me again. Come back on the stage and I shall be delighted to see you," I vowed that I would.

And I did.

"I Can Derive Pleasure From Reading the Congressional Record."